

Interview techniques: Preparing your armoury

To know exactly how to sell yourself when you go into your interview, preparation is vital.

Self-assessment

Before you even begin job hunting, spend time assessing your skills, experience, strengths, limitations and personal preferences. Although you may already have an idea of this, it is still important to conduct a self-audit so that you can go into an interview knowing exactly how to sell yourself.

If you're preparing for a specific interview, it's worth familiarising yourself with the job description or brief before tackling this task.

Your primary aim is to convince the interviewer that:

- You would be able to do the job competently.
- You can bring enhanced benefits to the company.
- You are the best candidate on both of the above counts.

With this in mind, begin by looking at your background and sketch a profile of your key attributes which best fit the interviewer's impression of an ideal candidate.

Skills

Using the key skills outlined in your CV, ask yourself what you can do for the company. Until you're actually at the interview it may be difficult to identify exactly what the role entails, so it's important that you know which of your skills you can apply to the job.

The interviewer will want to know how competent and adaptable you will be in fulfilling the managerial and administrative aspects of a new job. These are areas that your CV cannot reveal accurately.

The following list of competencies is adapted from national standards identified by the MCI Occupational Standards of Management. Run through the list and assess your ability at each using the following range of possibilities:

- I am very competent
 - I am competent, but could improve
 - I could do the task adequately
 - My skills are underdeveloped for the task
1. Maintain operations to meet quality standards
 2. Implement and evaluate changes to services and products
 3. Make recommendations for budgeting and expenditure
 4. Monitor and control the use of resources
 5. Define future personnel requirements
 6. Contribute to the assessment and selection of candidates
 7. Develop teams through planning and organisation
 8. Review and improve development of subordinates
 9. Develop oneself within the job role
 10. Set and update team objectives
 11. Plan activities to ensure objectives are met
 12. Allocate work and evaluate individual performance, providing constructive feedback
 13. Establish and maintain the trust of your subordinates
 14. Establish and maintain the trust of your immediate manager
 15. Identify and minimise interpersonal conflict
 16. Counselling subordinates
 17. Obtain and evaluate information for decision making
 18. Record and store information
 19. Lead group meetings and discussions to solve problems and make decisions
 20. Advise and inform others.

You will now have a better idea of which areas to emphasise in the course of the interview, and which weaker areas will require some careful diplomacy.

Strengths

Your strengths are those unique aspects that could set you apart from other candidates. Combining them in the right manner to best suit the job at hand and draw attention away from your limitations is the key to landing the job.

Below is a list of the common important strength areas. They are not ranked in any specific order of importance. It is unlikely that you will be strong in all areas, so be realistic in your assessment. As before, mark each one according to the following criteria: **Always; Usually; Occasionally; Never.**

- Leadership by example
- Self-confidence
- Commitment
- Determination
- Enthusiasm
- Stamina
- Strength of will
- Competitiveness
- Good judgement
- Confidence with decision-making
- Willingness to take responsibility
- Ability and confidence to take risks
- Quick thinking
- Initiative
- Creativity
- Organisational ability
- Flexibility
- Commercial understanding
- Striking a balance between details and the bigger picture
- Sensitivity to people

Having given each of these a rating, rank them first in order of strength (i.e. those marked as 'always' at the top of the list followed by 'usually' and so on), and then make a separate list ordered according to how relevant you think these are to the new role.

Now you can compare the two lists, paying attention to those strengths that appear high on both, and even more attention to those areas that appear low on the strengths list but high on the 'required' list for the new role. It is also worth considering those strengths that have really helped your career path thus far.

Limitations

These are more difficult to pinpoint than your strengths, but equally important if you wish to improve on yourself. You'll almost certainly be asked the question "what are your weaknesses?" in the interview, and it's advisable to have a few well-prepared, confident answers.

It's easier if you consider the shortcomings you experienced in your previous jobs and how you overcame them. Ask yourself:

- In which areas can I really improve?
- What were the tasks and situations I had the most difficulty with?
- In which instances did my colleagues react negatively towards me?
- Were there any reasons for hindering my progress and promotion?
- Why am I leaving my present job?

Use the following list of attributes as a guideline for answering the questions above.

- Leadership
- Competitiveness
- Good judgement

- Confidence with decision-making
- Willingness to take responsibility
- Quick thinking
- Initiative
- Creativity
- Organisational ability
- Flexibility
- Striking a balance between details and the bigger picture
- Sensitivity to people

There are two ways of dealing with your limitations in terms of the interview. You can identify the most critical of the weakness or limitations and explain how you will actively strive to improve on them, but this could be time-consuming and impractical. Or you can choose to name limitations that are likely to be of little concern to the interviewer or that you can realistically offer tangible explanations for.

Achievements

Some of us have many achievements to choose from and may have difficulty being modest about them, while others find themselves scratching their heads trying to think of something significant. Achievements needn't be grandiose or specifically related to your job as long as they can demonstrate your good qualities and show that you have the ability to succeed.

Successfully managing a project to a strict deadline is an example of an achievement. So is landing your previous job in the face of stiff competition, or successfully changing your career at the age of 40, or running a marathon.

There's no room for modesty in an interview. You'll invariably be asked, "What you think your best achievement was?" A modest answer may show that you lack self-confidence.

Of course, it doesn't pay to exaggerate your achievements or overstretch the imagination. It is wise to be brief but affirmative and confident when mentioning your achievements, allowing the interviewer to press for more details.

Profiles

Having completed the previous exercises, it should now be easy to create a profile of yourself. The purpose of this is to summarise your strengths into two brief descriptions of no more than 50 words, starting with "I am a...?" The object is to go into an interview with this 'sales pitch' clearly in your mind.

Examples:

Personal Profile: I am an ambitious, organised and highly motivated individual who is goal driven and excels at building long-term customer relationships. My ability to manage people is shown by winning the national sales manager's award for outstanding team performance. Occasionally I am intolerant of incompetence. After hours I enjoy fitness and recreational volleyball.

This profile highlights at least five desirable traits. One of them should be aimed specifically at the role (building long-term customer relationships), while also including an achievement (winning an award) that simultaneously demonstrates the individual's people skills. The limitation (impatience) has been turned around into 'incompetence intolerance' and two non work related traits have been included which re-affirm this person's suitability for teamwork, and the pride they take in themselves.

Business Profile: I am an experienced sales professional with five years specific experience in the car industry, specialising in corporate fleet sales. I have the ability to diversify into LDVs and commercial vehicle sales, with strong product knowledge, and a particularly good understanding of market trends, and competitors. I am also confident that I can direct a regional team.

The business profile shows quantifiable experience, with a specific direction and flexibility for new roles. It is backed up with 'product knowledge' and an 'understanding of trends'. This person knows distinctly where he is coming from and where he intends to go professionally. Clearly he is looking for a sales director position. This sure-mindedness would come across well when used in an appropriate interview.

Self-esteem

Of course none of the above counts for much if you lack self-esteem. Without sufficiently buoyant self-esteem, you may find that you leave an impression that is less than you deserve.

Building self-esteem can be a terrible 'catch 22' situation, especially if you are unhappy in your current job. Our job is one of the most important aspects of our lives. Naturally it's dangerous to our sense of self-esteem if too much importance rests on our job and things are not going well, but it's important to convince ourselves that around the corner is a better job.

There are two types of esteem:

Internal: which rests on your own beliefs about yourself, what you've achieved and what you can achieve. It's healthiest to accept your strengths and limitations objectively, rather than striving to be perfect. See yourself as equal to, but different to others rather than superior or inferior.

External: this is the tricky one, since it comes from our interaction with other people and situations. But this is all relative and subject to our own interpretations or sensitivity. Always remember that ultimately *you* let others tell you how good you are, in other words, the same belittling comment from a colleague could mean two entirely different things to you depending on your frame of mind at the time. You can't avoid them saying it, but you can avoid letting it bother you.

Pay attention to your frame of mind when preparing for an interview. With a balanced sense of self-esteem your judgement is more realistic and it places your strengths and limitations in perspective.

It helps to balance positive attitude against over-confidence, and it affects your thinking, your ability to answer, your tone of voice, your body language, the subconscious first impressions you give off, the rapport between you and the interviewer, the answers you give, and your negotiating skills when it comes to accepting an offer. Most importantly, it is the foundation for positive thinking.

Positive thinking

If you don't believe in yourself, then how on earth are you going to convince the interviewer to believe in you! Throughout the preparation for an interview, a positive frame of mind is important otherwise you'll tend to develop negative answers and explanations for your interview.

Here are few points to be aware of when trying to develop a positive frame of mind:

- Humans have a remarkable habit of fearing those things which they cannot do, rather than appreciating their potential and believing in their ability to rise to the occasion.
- Remind yourself that you've been short-listed you from many other applicants, therefore you must stand a pretty good chance.
- Feeling a little nervous before the interview is perfectly normal, it's a sign of anticipation and that you're anxious to prove yourself.
- Never be afraid of failure; remind yourself there's always something bigger and better out there if you fail to land this job. Remember, the interview practise will help you perform better next time.
- Without feeling over-confident, it's sometimes surprisingly effective if you go into an interview with the attitude that they want you more than you want the job.

The job brief

Assessing your personal profile is only half the task, now you need to familiarise yourself with the job, the company and its expectations.

The agency or HR department may have supplied you with a descriptive brief of the role, and possibly some details on the company. If not ask for one. The more you know about the job and company prior to the interview the bigger your impact. The interviewer will certainly be impressed with your diligence and enthusiasm, and naturally it reflects the thoroughness of your work.

Here is a suggested list of some of the information worth researching:

- What is the exact nature of the company's business? It sounds too obvious but don't be fooled.
- What are its key product portfolios and revenue streams?

- How many staff does it have? What is the average age of staff, the company culture etc?
- What is the company's annual turnover and profit?
- Who are its main competitors?
- Has it been in the press lately, are there any controversial announcements or decisions?
- Does the company have any major projects or changes planned?
- Who are the CEO, MD and other relevant directors? Especially the person responsible for the department in which the vacancy exists.
- What sort of industry or business climate does this company trade in? What are the trends and potential challenges?

This could prove to be a real drag, but bear in mind you only need to know enough to leave an impression. Furthermore, the role that you're going for will determine which of the above are worth researching, e.g. knowing competitors would be useful to a sales candidate.

So where can you find all this out? Fortunately the internet makes life a lot easier for all of us. Visit the company website, or conduct a search on news sites dedicated to that particular industry.

Another means is to contact the company's PR department and ask for information, such as a company report or recent press releases. They are always happy to promote the company, and you could even pose as a journalist if you have the nerve!

Sometimes it even pays to be direct and tell them that you're a prospective candidate. In small companies this could be fed back to the interviewer and your reputation for preparation would then precede you!

Alternatively, if you applied for the job through a recruitment agency, you could ask for their advice on the company's profile. The agency may have placed several people within the company and would therefore be very familiar with its activities.

And finally...

The amount of preparation is a reflection of how seriously you want to land the job.

- Aim to refine your profile into a 50-word description that you can memorise and take into the interview with you.
- Remember that the aim is to make the interviewer feel you are the most suitable and competent person for the job.
- Assess your strengths and skills and prioritise them according to the needs of the new role.
- Cover your limitations with valid alternatives.
- Build your preparation on solid self-esteem.
- Think positively!
- Know the job and company thoroughly before going into the interview.
- Find out exactly where the interview is, and how long it will take to get there, adding a reasonable amount of time to account for delays.